The Style of Negation and the Negation of Style: The Anglicization of the Situationist International

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"How are we to understand," asks the eminent British art historian T. J. Clark,

the obvious (but scandalous) fact that in Debord's case politics was largely writing – that it turned on the building of an inimitable polemical and expository style, assembled over decades, born from a series of engagements with, on and against the French language? ¹

The question pertains to the categorization of different critical practices and, more specifically, to distinctions made between practices of writing and practices of more immediate political consequence, though the latter are not identified. Clark recognizes that for Guy Debord writing was a mode of political intervention, and his writing intervened into "politics" by way of its a priori intervention into "language."

In his role as founding member of the Situationist International (1957–1972), Debord reiterated the dictum of the historical avant-garde, as identified by Peter Bürger, that artistic and life praxes (and, by extension, writing and politics) must be sublated, to become no longer separate and distinct categories. ² In his many autobiographical texts, Debord insisted that his legacy would not be as a writer but as someone who exposed and acted directly upon the conditions of his world-historical moment. ³ The discrepancy – and to Debord's hagiographers, the scandal – that troubles Clark is this: despite the disavowals of disciplinary specialization across his various self-authored panegyrics, Debord fits the mold of the littérateur disconcertingly well. Not only did Debord's political interventions mostly take the form of writing, but that writing itself took a particular form. Clark mentions its style. Debord's writing is remarkably stylized, it flaunts its own artistry and artifice, which makes Debord's writerliness doubly disconcerting because the evident pleasure that he took from sophisticated rhetorical tropes might seem to be at odds with his analysis of the repressive and ideological functions of stylization in what he called the society of the spectacle.

Style, as it is used in Clark's question, points to two interconnected features of Debord's writing. On the one hand, Clark emphasizes the unique prose style of Debord's writing. It would be misleading to suggest that Debord's prose style is consistent across all of his writing, but from the zealous and pugnacious declarations of his pre- and early Situationist writings to the aphoristic theses of Society of the Spectacle (1967) to the romantic melancholy of later autobiographical writings like Panegyrics (1989), his prose style is characterized by what Clark elsewhere calls a "chiliastic serenity." ⁴ On the other hand, Clark's description of Debord's style as "polemic and expository" marks something beyond prose style but connected to it: something less closely focused on the language itself, and more on the structure of the text; a sense of how Debord chose to present his critical method, which encompasses his aesthetic tactics and his political intentions. This essay's first investigations shall be into Debord's pronouncements on style at the end of the eighth chapter of Society of the Spectacle, where he explicates the "style of negation" that he considers proper to dialectical theory. ⁵

Yet Clark's question also describes Debord's consolidated style as "inimitable." Surely no prose style is beyond imitation, even if that should take the form of mimicry or pastiche? Likewise, surely no critical method is useful only to its originator? After all, Debord's pronouncements on style in Society of the Spectacle are there to encourage others to follow his example. Clark's verdict, in 1999, that Debord's style is inimitable would seem to emerge from a particular context and a particular history. Clark specifies that Debord's engagement is with the "French language:" my essay's second investigation shall be into Clark's own efforts as part of the Situationist International's short-lived English Section (1966–1967) to Anglicize Debord's critique of consumer capitalism and establish a specifically English Situationist practice. The English Section, the journal Heatwave (two issues, both 1966) that came before it, and the successor group King Mob (1968 onwards) together developed an English Situationist style that was consistent with, but at the same time markedly different to, Debord's style of negation. My essay contributes to current efforts to reconsider the Situationist International (SI) in terms of its peripheral and lesser-studied configurations, a project manifest in McKenzie Wark's decentering of the story away from Debord and Paris in The Beach Beneath the Street(2011), Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jacobsen's documentation of Scandinavian Situationist practices in Expect Anything Fear Nothing (2011) and Richard Gilman-Opalsky's argument for a new philosophy of praxis in Spectacular Capitalism (2011). In my case, the peripheral activities are those in England in the late 1960s.

In their efforts to establish an English Situationist practice, the various theorists and activists were confronted with a hurdle faced by many earlier English Europhile modernists: the Anglicization of Continental avant-gardes. The clearest precursors to the English Situationists in this project were the artists and theorists who, in the 1930s, had attempted to establish an English Surrealism. The Surrealist Group in England, which initially modeled itself on André Breton's French Surrealist group, was met with resistance from many English critics who regarded (what they understood as) Surrealism's quintessential Frenchness as incompatible with (their understanding of) English culture. ¹ Three decades later, history repeated itself. The first English reviewers of Situationist texts echoed the accusations once made of Surrealist texts: the texts as incomprehensible, obscurantist, incorrigible; the texts as politically ineffectual despite their grandiose claims; the texts as too French for an English audience. Yet Surrealism did eventually take root in English culture in a variety of disparate and denatured forms, and England did too develop its own versions of Situationist practice. I shall argue that the first generation of English Situationists performed a reflexive and historically informed cultural translation of Debord and the SI. Heatwave, the English Section and King Mob developed an English Situationist style as a correlative and an Anglophonic corrective to the style that Debord describes and demonstrates in Society of the Spectacle – though, I shall demonstrate, the process of Anglicization served to negate the negative principle of Debord's style of negation.
Guy Debord and the style of negation

It is not only Anglophone critics who have found difficulties with Debord’s textual style. In a review of Society of the Spectacle in the French literary magazine La Quinzaine littéraire on 1 February 1968, Claude Lefort writes:

One would have expected this book to be a violent attack against its adversaries, but in fact this ostentatious discourse has no other aim than showing off. Admittedly it has a certain beauty. The style is flawless. Since any question that does not have an automatic response has been banished from the very first lines, one would search in vain for any fault. 

For Lefort, the “style” – principally, the prose style – of Debord’s text serves to distract from, or even replace, its political content. Lefort’s back-handed compliment complains of an excess of style, of the text being stylized at the expense of critical rigor. The division between form and content that Lefort assumes is precisely what Debord rallies against in the final theses of Society of the Spectacle’s chapter “Negation and Consumption in Culture.” "The language of contradiction," which is the necessary language of critical theory, he writes, "must be dialectical in its form as it is in its content." 1 The “mode of exposition of dialectical theory,” Debord continues, occurs through the style of negation that simultaneously "contains its own critique" and "is a scandal and abomination to the rules of the dominant language.” 2

Style, as Debord uses the term, relates to what he calls the “mode of exposition” of a critique. Debord’s formulation thus corresponds with Clark’s twofold sense of style, as prose style and critical method. For Debord, this consolidated style must perform a particular labor: it must demonstrate, not simply speak of, the thinking behind it. I shall explore this demonstrative capability shortly, but first it is worth clarifying what, for Debord, critical thought must entail. He describes his conception of dialectical thought as the inverse of affirmation; not to valorize but to negate. In the SI’s logic of récupération (sometimes translated as “co-optation”), any form of positivism will be appropriated and nullified by power. To evade the recuperation of her texts and write in a manner as incommensurate as possible with the spectacle, Debord sees the task of the critical theorist as the antithetical one of portraying the negative images of the false-positives of the spectacle. Debord describes the spectacle as the “affirmation of appearance” and the “negation of life:" 3 the critical theorist must negate that negation. The challenge is not to affirm a different mode of being but to negate the dominant one, with the Benjamanian promise that a more authentic something else will be illuminated in the process. Indeed, in this account, Debord’s treatment of style is remarkably similar to the concept of darstellung with which Adorno wrangled, and the SI’s efforts toward a textual representation of dialectical thinking which resists recuperation and all forms of positivism frequently converge with those of the Frankfurt School. 4

Debord’s particular conception of a negative-dialectical mode of critique is exemplified, metonymically, by the practice of détournement, which the SI had already defined as the appropriation, rearrangement, and subversion of already-existing expressions. Debord describes détournement as, variously, "the opposite of quotation," "the fluid language of anti-ideology," and the restoration "to subversion of previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths." 5 Debord’s description, above, of his style of negation as a "scandal and abomination to the rules of the dominant language" is itself a détournement of Marx’s description of Capital’s dialectical method as "a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie." 6

Do Debord’s texts demonstrate the style of negation that he explicates in Society of the Spectacle – or, does he perform the style of negation? This is difficult to ascertain, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the absolutism and hyperbole of Debord’s rhetoric gloss over its contradictions. Society of the Spectacle espouses negation and decries affirmation, but to espouse negation is itself to affirm that tactic: this paradox leads to dilemmas of representation beyond the scope of this essay. Secondly, across Debord’s oeuvre we can find instances where pure negation was simply untenable. For example, his first film, Hurlements en faveur de Sade (1952), attempted to negate the cinematic image by projecting only white light onto the screen, or no light at all (accompanied by a fragmented voiceover). This tactic was necessarily limited, and his subsequent films returned to images, though mostly détourned from other films. In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni (1978, notice the palindrome) recognized its own conflicted status: its narration admits, "The existing images only reinforce the existing lies" and, "This film disdains the image-scrapes of which it is composed." 7 Debord’s style of negation is perhaps, therefore, a hypothesis, a proposition or a challenge, rather than a hard-and-fast rule. Finally, in relation to my focus on how Debord’s treatment of style has been translated to English, it remains difficult to establish how Debord was read in the Anglophone world in the late 1960s. Some of the individuals in the groups I shall shortly introduce could read French, but some could not; the latter read translations that circulated as underground pamphlets, or became familiar with Debord’s work second-hand, through conversation and secondary texts.

To obtain a sense of how Debord’s English translators have understood the various roles of style in, specifically, Society of the Spectacle, I shall compare two early translations of a relevant thesis. The original thesis 204 reads:

La théorie critique doit se communiquer dans son propre langage. C’est le langage de la contradiction, qui doit être dialectique dans sa forme comme il l’est dans son contenu. Il est critique de la totalité et critique historique. Il n’est pas un « degré zéro de l’écriture » mais son renversement. Il n’est pas une négation du style, mais le style de la négation. 8

The first translation into English – published in 1970 by the American Fredy Perlman, in which Debord, not fluent in English, recognized some “obvious” weaknesses – reads:

Critical theory must be communicated in its own language. It is the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in form as it is in content. It is critique of the totality and historical critique. It is not ‘the nadir of writing’ but its inversion. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation. 9
A translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith, eventually published in 1994 but dating much earlier, sees Debord’s text being adapted into what had become the English Situationist style that I shall soon elucidate (Nicholson-Smith was, with Clark, a member of the English Section):

Critical theory has to be communicated in its own language – the language of contradiction, dialectical in form as well as in content: the language of the critique of the totality, of the critique of history. Not some “writing degree zero” – just the opposite. Not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

The variations between the translated texts are evidence of the different but mutually determinative levels at which translation operates. The translator’s recognition or ignorance of particular nuances or allusions, mostly at the level of content, affects the translation, which in turn affects the reproduction of the ethos represented by the original text. The clearest evidence of an Anglophonic unfamiliarity with Debord’s Francophone context is that Perlman does not recognize the swipe at Roland Barthes’s Le Degré zéro de l’écriture (1953). Barthes’s text responded to the problem of alienated language by proposing a fresh start, a degree zero of writing. In contrast, Debord proposes to take what already exists and to exacerbate whatever possibilities for play remain therein. Meanwhile, the most obvious Anglophonic projection onto Debord’s text is made by Nicholson-Smith’s colloquialisms, “Not some” and “just the opposite.” His translation jettisons the classical rhetoric and grammatical elegance of Debord’s prose. For example, after its first sentence, Debord’s thesis is structured through a series of parallelisms: Positive and positive. Positive and positive. Negative, but positive. Negative, but positive. Nicholson-Smith drops the subjects from sentences, which become grammatically incorrect, and adds discrepant punctuation. The regimented organization and internal dynamics of Debord’s text are lost to a looser and less formal style.

A more fundamental misprision is that Perlman and Nicholson-Smith both render “critical theory” as the object rather than the subject of the first sentence. For Debord, critical theory must communicate itself (he even italicizes this): it is not to be communicated, but it must do its own work; it must be dialectical in its form as in its content. However, they do both recognize one instance of how Debord’s text allies its form with its content – or, more precisely, its mode of exposition with its mode of critique. Both include the chiasmus with which Debord’s thesis culminates. Chiasmic phrasings are integral to the consolidated style identified and attempted in Society of the Spectacle. Debord borrows the trope from Marx’s early writings and, indeed, thesis 206 makes reference to Marx’s Poverty of Philosophy (1847), whose own title is a chiasmic reversal of Proudhon’s “philosophy of poverty.” Marx often used chiasma to differentiate his project from his predecessors. In this instance, Marx implies that though Proudhon considers the right things, he does so the wrong way round. Proudhon, like Hegel, is standing on his head. Debord, too, uses chiasma and détournements, including those of Marx, to mark his corrections of existing philosophies. Debord’s chiasma also act to expose the processes of falsification and mystification performed by the spectacle, as in the following examples from just the text’s first chapter:

“[The spectacle says,] What appears is good, what is good appears;”
“It does not realise philosophy, it philosophises reality;”
“As long as necessity is socially dreamed, the dream becomes necessary;”
“The spectacle reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separation.”

Similarly, the chapter includes also a number of statements whose structure may not be chiasmatic, but whose logic is, such as: “[The spectacle is] a concrete inversion of life;”
“In a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false.”

The chiasmic ABBA form rearranges the elements of its first half in its second, consistent with the SI’s description of détournement as “the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble.” The chiasmic structure neatly demonstrates the repetition and reversal that is the process of détournement and the basis of Debord’s style of negation. Repetition and reversal occur in chiasmus in a particularly visual manner: we can see, actually see, the elements being rearranged into a new ensemble. Chiasmus thus replicates the process of détournement, not just the end result—such is the meaning of Clark’s description of Debord’s style as “expository” and Debord’s own insistence on the interrelation of form and content. The paradox indicated by Lefort, that Debord offers a critique of spectacular inauthenticity by way of an extreme formalism in his text, is anticipated by the chiasmus of thesis 204. “Il n’est pas une négation du style,” Debord parries, “mais le style de la négation.” The style of negation does not offer an image alternative to spectacular inauthenticity, but it does offer itself as a process that can undo that inauthenticity. Four theses later, Debord states that détournement – we might also read “chiasm” or any other figure of this negative-dialectical process of repetition and reversal – “found its cause on nothing other than its own truth as present critique.”

The earliest English Situationists were true to Debord’s valorization of the process of repetition and reversal, but they applied the process both to the critique of spectacular society and to the SI’s own work. The English Situationists found that to translate the SI’s critique for a different cultural and linguistic context, they needed to imagine their relationship with the SI as a chiasmic one. They felt that they needed to détourn Debord, as Debord détourned Marx, who détourned Hegel, and so on.

The English Situationists and the negation of the style of negation
Most of the early active engagement with the SI in Britain occurred in the West London counterculture of the Sixties. Two special issues of the Times Literary Supplement (TLS), in August and September 1964, on contemporary avant-garde movements, reported on this engagement, with articles by Michèle Bernstein of the SI and Jørgen Nash of the expelled Scandinavian Situationists. The Scottish novelist and countercultural celebrity Alexander Trocchi had also been a member of the SI until his exclusion in 1964, and his writings had brought Situationist ideas to the milieu represented by the underground magazines International Times and Oz. The French
publication in 1967 of Debord’s *La Société du spectacle* (as well as Raoul Vaneigem’s *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*) began to attract more mainstream attention to the SI.

In March 1968, the TLS published a review of Debord’s text. The review leans heavily on English stereotypes of the French as surly and haughty. It patronizes the Situationists, “who poke fun at everyone else, [but] take themselves very seriously indeed.” The review also speculates – before the momentous events of May and June that year – that, “The situationists' political influence appears to be nil,” though it supposes that their “austere philosophy […] may not be without influence on future […] libertarian manifestations.” About Situationist activity in England, the TLS notes only “a tiny British neo-surrealist group, best known for its defence of juvenile delinquency in an apparently defunct journal called *Heatwave*” that had issued “poor” translations of a couple of the SI’s texts. Nearly 20 years later in 1987 – again, just before another important moment in the popularization of the SI, a 1989 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Institutes of Contemporary Art in London and Boston – English arts publications were still bemused by the Situationists. In *Artscritie International*, the group Art & Language writes that, “Situationist texts are very difficult to read, very difficult to concentrate on […] The texts are effectively incorrigible and self-insulating and then some!” The emergence of English Situationists is acknowledged, though Art & Language is no less disparaging than was the TLS. The English Situationist had progressed from his “tiny” groups and “defunct” journals to merit his own caricature, “Ralph the Situationist,” a 20-something male, barefoot, chain-smoking, angry yet essentially harmless.

Like Lefort, the TLS and Art & Language are distracted from the content of Situationist texts by their style. Debord’s refusal to explicitly affirm which he endorses and authenticates is not understood as a form of negation but as difficulty for its own sake, as the lack of a necessary element of self-reflexivity and levity. Both the TLS and Art & Language treat the Situationists differently, as if to exaggerate their Anglophonic bafflement at such curiously French texts. Both implicitly maintain that style legitimates a critique: the idiosyncratic style of Situationist texts is not the style proper to political discourse as they understand it, and as such the Situationists are not taken seriously as discursive political subjects. Perhaps the sneering attitudes of TLS and Art & Language corroborate Debord’s claim that his style is “a scandal and abomination to the rules of the dominant language.”

Regardless of the mockery of the TLS, the “tiny British neo-surrealist” Heatwave group coalesced in 1967 into the English Section of the SI, approved by Debord. The English Section comprised only four members: T. J. Clark, whose involvement in the Retort collective still bears the traces of his English Situationist past; Donald Nicholson-Smith, who maintained the closest relationship in the 1960s with Debord in Paris; Christopher Gray, who produced the earliest English translations of Situationist pamphlets, and edited the first English collection of Situationist texts, *Leaving the Twentieth Century* (1974); and Heatwave founder Charles Radcliffe, whose interest in anarchism and African-American culture, and whose personal connection with the Chicago-based neo-surrealist journal *Rebel Worker*, sowed the seeds of what became the English Section.

The English Section did not remain part of the SI for long. Within a year it was expelled for having fostered an affiliation with the New York anarchist group Black Mask (later known as Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker, led by Ben Morea) from whom Debord and the SI had acrimoniously split. The expelled English Situationists resumed their project as King Mob, indebted to Situationist theory but disconnected from the SI as an organization. The Heatwave journal, the English Section, and King Mob represent three stages in the development of English Situationist practice. Each new configuration developed the style of the last and further détourned Debord’s style of negation.

**First phase: Heatwave**

*Heatwave* lasted for only two issues, both published in 1966, but it established the interests and objectives of English Situationist practice. *Heatwave* drew from French Surrealist, American anarchist, and English pop-cultural sources to argue that the revolutionary agents of the future would not be the urban proletariat but juvenile delinquents. Youth subcultures were much-studied phenomena in the 1960s, the subjects of tabloid scare-stories and early Birmingham School cultural studies, yet rarely was it stated so explicitly that juvenile delinquents were to be aided and abetted as it was in *Heatwave*. “Youth revolt,” writes Radcliffe, “is not necessarily a panacea; neither is it necessarily the precursor of social revolution; rather a grim-humoured reaction to the frustration implicit in this society and this manner of living. It is one of the few things in this society worth serious defence and support. I welcome youth’s rage: I share it. I support their outrages because I wish for explosions infinitely more brain-peeling than in their wildest, most socially profane dreams.”

*Heatwave*’s efforts to support and legitimize youth revolt consisted of articles that outlined its social contexts, international homologies and the historical genealogies of its disparate manifestations. The quotation above is from an article titled “The Seeds of Social Destruction,” which catalogues the “post war unofficial youth movements” in Britain (Teddy Boys, Ton-Up Kids, Beats, Ban the Bombers, Ravers, Mods and Rockers), which it depicts as a series of as-yet un-self-conscious rebellions against capitalist society. Radcliffe’s reading of youth revolt was largely informed by his knowledge of the Provos movement in Holland, in which young Dutch anarchists attempted to channel the aggression of the Nozems (the Dutch equivalent to the Teddy Boys) into a political force by way of organized provocations that would incite aggressive state repression and thus catalyze further unrest. Radcliffe visited Amsterdam to observe first-hand the Provos’ activities, which he documented in “Daytripper! A Visit to Amsterdam 22/6/66” in the first *Heatwave*. The SI was also beginning to consider the role of disaffected youths as agents of social disruption, and claimed its own influence on the Provos in “Revolt and Recuperation in Holland” in *Internationale Situationiste* 11 (October 1967).

The *Heatwave* prose style is journalistic, even tabloid. Radcliffe uses an effusive and sensationalist register, voiced in the first-person, in contrast to Debord’s “chilastic serenity.” Radcliffe articulates what he regards as the emergent political consciousness of the youth movements in the language of existential angst. He is more interested in the immediacy of youthful dissatisfaction than a critique of social conditions, as demonstrated by one of his own chiasma: “In a society which has everything, everyone wants nothing.” In this instance, the certainty and assumed self-evidence of the chiasmic form does seem to substitute for any engaged critical labor on
Radcliffe's part. Heatwave's affective and rousing tone was certainly distanced from Debord's style of negation, and Radcliffe was later to dismiss his Heatwave writings as "pop sociology."  

Second phase: English Section of the Situationist International

The English Section issued only two original texts before its expulsion. As such, it is difficult to regard the group as much more than the stage in the development of English Situationist practice when French and English currents ran closest but the latter remained too close to its source to have gathered much momentum of its own. The English Section's first text was a postscript to its translation of the infamous 1966 Situationist pamphlet "On the Poverty of Student Life" ("De la misère en milieu étudiant"). The English Section's postscript offers a survey of Situationist activity in France and proposes how similar activity could be catalyzed in England, "the temporary capital of the spectacular world."  

However, the English Section's translation of the main text, retitled Ten Days That Shook the University, is more illustrative of the interplay between the group's literal and cultural translations of the SI. The final sentence of the original pamphlet – after stating that proletarian revolutions must be festivals – contends, "Le jeu est la rationalité ultime de cette fête, vivre sans temps mort et jouir sans entraves sont les seules règles qu'il pourra reconnaître." The emphasis on play ("the game is the ultimate principle of this festival") was derived from the SI's reading of Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens (1938). The commands "vivre sans temps mort" and "jouir sans entraves," both of which would become famous slogans during May 1968, are further evidence of the SI's delight in wordplay. The former is simple enough, "Live without dead time," but the latter plays on the double meaning of "jouir" to mean both "enjoy without restraint" and, in a sexual sense, "come without restraint." The English Section's translation differs, firstly, by adding a reference to Blake: "in revolution the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom;" the part I italicized is an aphorism from "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (c.1790–1793). Secondly, the English Section does not replicate the double-entendre, but ends on an impassioned and affective address: "The rules are simple: to live instead of devising a lingering death, and to indulge untrammelled desire."  

The English Section's original pamphlet was titled with another chiasmus, "The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution" (1967). This text applies Heatwave's faith in youth revolt to Situationist discourse. The English Section argues that "the juvenile delinquents – not the pop artists – are the true inheritors of Dada." These references signal its new-found interest in the artistic avant-garde; another new interest is Marxist theory, and so the English Section declares delinquent youth to be the "new lumpen." Though Marx was wary of the lumpenproletariat's propensity for reaction, radical Marxisms of the 1960s had imbued this sub-class with revolutionary potential, most notably in Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth (1967) and Huey P. Newton's Black Panther Party writings.  

The English Section's text discards Radcliffe's subjectivism in favor of a more socio-political analysis. It declares: The formation of the new lumpen prefigures several features of an all-encompassing subversion. On the one hand, the lumpen is the sphere of complete social breakdown of apathy, negativity and nihilism […] Initially the new lumpen will probably be our most important theatre of operations. We must enter it as a power against it and precipitate its crisis.  

The English Section pulls the style of English Situationist discourse away from Radcliffe's "pop sociology" and toward the more abstract and totalizing concerns of the SI. It does not rearticulate Radcliffe's "I wish" but rather a "we must." Like Debord, the English Section declares its truths to be self-evident yet obfuscated in the present moment, and assumes its own world-historical significance: it regards itself as the agent that must push the present moment to its crisis. Such imperatives tend to "The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution" a recognizable literary-polemical form, the manifesto, evident in the English Section's vision of a new world which "will no longer accept any internal division or separation. Life will be the creation of life itself."  

Third phase: King Mob

When the English Section was expelled from the SI in 1967, and some of its members and affiliates regrouped as King Mob, the style of English Situationist texts was pushed to its most extreme conclusions. Instead of speaking or for the new lumpen, as had Radcliffe and the English Section respectively, King Mob attempted to speak as the new lumpen: to perform linguistically the intervention of this sub-class into the scene of political comprehensibility; to perform by way of language the new lumpen's disruption of bourgeois convention. King Mob developed a prose style heavy with colloquialisms, profanity, and insults. Like Debord, it wanted its language to be "a scandal and abomination" to prevailing standards, but its methods were rather different.  

King Mob circulated pamphlets, posters, and its journal King Mob Echo in counter-cultural milieux, activist circles, and during pranks and direct actions, but it produced no single work that synthesized its project as Debord had attempted with Society of the Spectacle. Unlike the plenitude and literariness of Debord's archive, King Mob's is ephemeral and fragmentary. Through an attempted sublation of the categories of life and art common to 1960s avant-garde practice (the artist as the artwork, etc.), King Mob relied on producing itself as an image of critique, specifically, as a rabid gang of proletarian delinquents. Its texts are crude, obscene, and calculatedly anti-social. Take, for example, King Mob's interpretation of Futurism – an interpretation which bears on King Mob's own persona. An anonymous article in the third King Mob Echo (1969) describes Futurism as:  

the post-artistic way of life of a Marineti … Marinetti beating up Wyndham Lewis in an allnight urinal … Marinetti, even at the end, at one of Mussolini's gales, kicking over a banquet table on top of Hitler, just to show that he really couldn't give a fuck  

King Mob drew its avant-gardist and ultra-leftist concerns from the SI, but its hyper-masculinist aggression was drawn from its interpretation of Futurism and from its Anglicization of the aesthetic of the Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker group. This self-styled "street gang with an analysis" had already been the cause of the English Section's expulsion from the SI, which had denounced the Motherfuckers as mystical, sensationalist, and spectacularized.
"The third King Mob Echo" is one long article that defends and glorifies the Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker group. It claims that the Motherfuckers' most radical gesture was "their faltering but persistent attempt to create a new form of self-expression beyond art and politics: a new revolutionary language." 45 King Mob aspired to its own linguistic intervention into life-praxis, which it hoped to accomplish through disavowing the Debordian style it inherited from the English Section and following instead the Motherfuckers' example. King Mob's article contrasts one of the Motherfuckers' early declarations with a later one, in order to trace how that group moved toward its "new revolutionary language":

In the first place, they started to write in the language of the streets. What, a few months before, had been 'The poverty against which man has been constantly struggling is not merely the poverty of material goods; in fact, in industrially advanced countries the disappearance of material poverty has revealed the poverty of existence itself' became 'Your community represents death. You eat dead food. You live dead lives. You fuck dead women. Everything about you is dead ... The struggle is for real life ...' From the Situationist SALON down to Skid Row. 46

The shift that King Mob recognizes – from an abstract and verbose analysis to a staccato sequence of slogans – is the same shift that King Mob attempted in distinguishing itself from its progenitors, English and French. King Mob clearly delights in the Motherfuckers' style of provocation, which led to the former's uncritical reproduction of the latter's sexism, evident above. In its preference for the American group's "language of the streets" over "the Situationist Salon," King Mob also reproduced the anti-intellectualist Francophobia that had colored the reception of the SI in Britain, though I do not mean to suggest that the SI was free of either sexism or national bias. 47 I want to argue that King Mob's ostensible lack of critical nuance was, nonetheless, an indirect response to DeBord's call for a style of negation.

The style of negation, as I have described it, demands an assault on spectacular images without the direct affirmation of whatever might be their more authentic replacement, but with the implied affirmation of a critical and even playful process of repetition and reversal. The particular literariness of King Mob's style, in contrast, turns on an overload of imagery appropriated from the most lurid and lowbrow sources: 8-movies; comic books; the tabloid press; horror stories; caricatures. King Mob texts are populated by dramatic personae drawn from sensationalist representations of the lumpenproletariat, from the football hooligans and skinheads of pulp novels to gothic Victorian villains. In their depiction of Marinetti as a rampant thug, above, King Mob encourages the reader to visualize him kicking over the table as one might picture a half-remembered scene from a movie. Debord's iconophobia is inverted in King Mob, which is phanopoetic in Ezra Pound's sense of using "a word to throw a visual image on the reader's imagination." 48 Whereas DeBord is reluctant to prescribe the content of anti-spectacular forms, King Mob attempts to identify and exacerbate sites of contestation within the spectacle itself. King Mob's rhetoric is violent, as demonstrated by some examples of its graffiti: "Burn it all down"; 49 "All you need is dynamite"; 50 and, another Blake reference, "The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." 51 King Mob texts abound in symbols, icons and images of the group authenticates, typically British lumpen vulgarity and American anarchistic radicalism.

King Mob's aesthetic of provocation and excess also turns on a double movement of style: on the one hand, the prose as a linguistic performance, the textual construction of a persona; on the other, the critical method, in which this constructed persona is the critique, the representation of the ugliest excesses and most bastardized expressions of spectacular society which are, at the same time, the spaces where an alternative might be experienced. The shared principle of King Mob and DeBord's texts is a belief in the polenical potential of style, in the necessity for political critique to first intervene in and as language. Society of the Spectacle demands from its reader an intellectual labor that the text simultaneously claims has been eradicated by the infantilizing and passive society of the spectacle. King Mob's style invokes a more straightforwardly imaginative labor, of visualizing the world according to King Mob's hyperbolically nihilistic and violent portrayal. With an understanding of politics and of social relations so rooted in the aesthetic motif of the spectacle, and so invested in a narrative of "real" politics being reduced to "mere" aesthetics, it should not be surprising that the Situationists (English and French) should be so conscious of the performative role of language in the articulation of their political critique. These relations can be summarized by another familiar chiasmus: the aesthetic is politicized as the political is aestheticized.

King Mob's style of provocation is a reversal of DeBord's style of negation into something affirmative, though not the same affirmation represented by the spectacle's endless procession of fetishized and alienating images of desire. DeBord's efforts toward anti-spectacularization become in King Mob a hyper-spectacularization to the same end: violence against the spectacle. As a result, DeBord and King Mob are diametrically opposed and connected, much like the two clauses of a chiasmus.

King Mob's chiasmatic inversion of DeBord is borne from the former's awareness of the typically hostile English reception of Situationist texts. To evade the difficulty of DeBord's texts, which English critics misrecognized as a difficulty stemming from their Frenchness rather than one which is inherent and necessary, King Mob resorted to a caricatured image of Britishness as brutishness. King Mob's flagrant refusal to adopt the high-artistry of DeBord's style indicates how King Mob cast itself as the type of philistine that Jameson identifies in Adorno: the philistine who is not ignorant of art but understands it "only too well" and, in particular, hates and refuses its deferral of happiness. 52 King Mob constructed its self-image through recourse to more proximate Anglophonic movements and through an ironic exaggeration of the stereotype of British culture as fearful of Continental abstraction. The result is an assault, to use Clark's phrasing, "with, on and against" the English language – yet this assault jettisons the irruptive difficulty of DeBord's style. King Mob produces a grotesque, a satire: King Mob's aesthetic is thus recognizable, familiar, easily comprehensible, and, in Situationist terms, recuperable.

In 1997, two years before asking the question which began this article, Clark co-authored with Nicholson-Smith the article, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International." 53 Clark and Nicholson-Smith reflect on their time as members of the SI and attempt to reconstruct the resistance with which they see the SI as having been met by left organizations and, in particular, the British New Left of the Sixties. 54 They provocatively characterize this resistance as the "efforts of organized knowledge to discredit the situationists" by labeling them as "infantile Leftism," as a dismissible phenomenon of "the 1960s," and as "hopelessly young-Hegelian." 55 In response, Clark and Nicholson-Smith contend:
The Society of the Spectacle was conceived and written as a book for bad times. It was intended to keep the habit of totalization alive—but of course to express, in every detail of its verbal texture and overall structure, what a labor of rediscovery and revoicing (indeed, of restating the obvious) that project would now involve.

Clark and Nicholson-Smith came to these conclusions through personal experience. Certainly, their English Section writings did not emerge from the Hegelian tradition in which they now recognize Debord’s place (which also suggests that the Anglophonic resistance to Debord’s difficult Frenchness relates to the Anglophonic distance from that Hegelian tradition). Clark and Nicholson-Smith insist that Debord must be read mindful of this “habit of totalization,” so that the double work of style, now expressed as the interaction of “verbal texture” with “overall structure,” is recognized. As a play on Clark and Nicholson-Smith’s derogatory term “organized knowledge,” I propose that Debord’s style of negation be understood as an attempt to disorganize knowledge. Stylistic conventions and contraventions were important tools in this project, represented by the disruptive jouissance of wordplay that literally reorganizes ossified expressions not only to create new possibilities but also to show that the process of creating new possibilities is still possible. Debord’s writing demands to be recognized as literature, but not to be read solely as literature: its literariness must be submitted to its politics but also its politics to its literariness.

Notes on contributor
Sam Cooper recently completed a DPhil at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on the legacy of the Situationist International in Britain, and the Anglophone engagement with Continental avant-gardism more generally. His writing has appeared, or will soon appear, in Cambridge Quarterly, New Formations, and World Picture.

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Notes
2. Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, 83. Debord writes that “Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; and surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it. The critical position elaborated since by the situationists has shown that the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.” Debord, La Société du spectacle, 848. Unless otherwise noted, translations from Society of the Spectacle are my own, made with reference to Ken Knabb’s 2004 translation for Rebel Press. Pages references are to the French version in Debord, Œuvres.
3. Debord’s most straightforward autobiography is indeed titled Panegyric (1989), which indicates his sense of individual world-historical significance; he also wrote that “all historians of the future will do is confirm the SI’s judgement” of its era, which locates the SI in and above its own moment. Situationist International, The Real Split in the International, 168.
5. Debord, La Société du spectacle, 853.
6. The debates about English Surrealism are discussed in Jackaman, The Course of English Surrealist Poetry; Ray, The Surrealist Movement in England; and Remy, Surrealism in Britain.
7. The review was reprinted in the SI’s journal, Internationale Situationniste, where, with characteristic venom, the Situationists dismiss Lefort as an "academic Marxist" once involved with the libertarian socialist journal Socialisme ou Barbarie (with which Debord had also once been involved) but now in pursuit of "an ordinary academic career." Situationist International, “How Not to Understand Situationist Books,” Internationale Situationniste 12 (1969), in Knabb, Situationist International Anthology, 339–340.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 768.
11. Anselm Jappe offers a critical comparison of the two theorists in “Sic Transia Gloria Artis.” Special Issue: Guy Debord.
15. Debord, La Société du spectacle, 853.
17. Debord, Society of the Spectacle. Translated by Fredy Perlman, unpaginated.


20. In 1973, to aid his translators, Debord produced a document indicating the sources of many of the text’s détournements. See “Relevé provisoire des citations et des détournements de La Société du spectacle” in Œuvres, 862–872. See also endnote 2 for Debord’s chiasmatic differentiation of the SI from Dada and Surrealism.

21. Debord, La Société du spectacle, 768, 769, 770, 771, 774.

22. Ibid., 766, 768.


26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.


29. See Retort, Afflicted Powers.

30. For the SI’s account of its expulsion of the English Section, see “The Latest Exclusions,” Internationale Situationniste 12 (1969), in Knabb, Situationist International Anthology, 375.


33. Ibid.

34. See Kempton, Provo.


39. The Situationists at Strasbourg, Ten Days that Shook the University, 23.


41. Ibid.

42. See Marx and Engels, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in Selected Works, 131–132. For Huey Newton’s reconsideration of the lumpenproletariat, see Morrison, To Die for the People.


44. Ibid., 70.

45. King Mob’s membership is difficult to ascertain. From the English Section, it was principally Gray who continued with King Mob.


47. Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker, “Affinity Group = A Street Gang with an Analysis,” in Vague, King Mob Echo, 118. See also Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker.

48. Ibid., 113.

49. Ibid.

50. See my own article, Cooper, “Sex and the Situs.”


52. The graffiti is documented in Vague, King Mob Echo, 98.
53. Ibid. Détournement of The Beatles’ “All you need is love” (1967).


55. Jameson, Late Marxism, 152–153. For a sustained discussion of the figure of the philistine, see Beech et al., The Philistine Controversy.


57. The English Situationists and the New Left maintained sectarian relations for many years. The New Left Review published its first article on the SI as late as 1989 (Peter Wollen’s “The Situationist International;” Wollen was the principal target of Clark and Nicholson-Smith’s attack), though Verso has now published a range of texts by and on the SI.


59. Ibid., 479.

Bibliography


